

# Corui Chronicle

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## EARMARKS

To promote themselves as common-sensical, fiscally responsible persons, economic hardliners – politicians, pundits, academics – often bad mouth earmarking, i.e. funding projects which strike them as being ridiculously pointless, absolutely devoid of practical benefits. Unless the earmark is of interest to their own supporters or elective districts, critics gleefully mock proposals for such things as: study of arachnophobia in urban adolescents; poetry readings at interstate highway rest stops; curling amphitheatres; macramé museums and so forth. Wasting time and money on obscure, unattractive plants and animals of no apparent utility seems especially to incense earmark monitors.

A recent happening which should be of interest to Chronicle readers, suggests another approach when considering these matters.

Many Pacific islands do (or did) support indigenous species of corvids, including the now-famous, tool making crows of New Calendonia and the presently very endangered Hawaiian Crow. Late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (sloth prevents me from determining the exact date) another such corvid species was identified in the Banggai Islands of the Sula chain near Celebes. In 1900 a few more were found on nearby Peleng Island. Two study skins of these birds ended up at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. However, after 1900 no more living Banggai crows were reported and it was generally thought the species had become extinct for reasons unknown.

Fast forward: In 2007 Indonesian ornithologists on Peleng found a population of what they thought might be Banggai



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crows. Additional study specimens were taken and examined by taxonomists at the Museum Zoologicum Boroniense in Java and by Pamela Rasmussen, a zoologist of Michigan State University.

In the fall of 2009 the examiners announced that these indeed were Banggai crows. Living birds of the species have now been found and photographed. Attempts are being made by the University of Indonesia to protect this once “lost” species, which is sometimes now hunted by island residents.

The history and fate of the Banggai



crows is of little, general ecological consequence and of no practical importance for us. But our interest in, involvement with these birds does display a – perhaps the – distinctive human attribute. It is our abiding curiosity about phenomenon for which we have no apparent, material need, use or appetite.

Pragmatics operate within the boundaries of the known, the necessary, tried and true. But regularly a few aimlessly motivated impracticals set off to explore the unknown; realms where is and isn't, possible and impossible cannot be easily or ever separately recognized. One important earmark of vigorous, confident civilized societies is their ability and inclination to support a certain number of these eccentric wanderers who though it may not have been their intent, sometimes—but certainly not always – come upon things which are pragmatically interesting and useful.

“Archimedes, get out of that tub. We’re expecting the Herods.”

“It’s those apples you keep dropping on the floor, Issac, that’s why the house is full of wasps.”

“So there’s the Banggai crows again. What are they going to do with them? Grind them up and find a cure for cancer?”

Subsidizing a certain number of trivial pursuits, Banggai crow-like earmarks is a legitimate civilized expense. It is a down payment, in a manner of speaking, on future prospects, made on the assumption we can do and be better than we now are. But, of course, how civilized can we afford to be remains an always legitimate present question. -- #51 Michigan roost

# POINT & COUNTERPOINT: *corvid intelligence debates*

A commentary on the intelligence of corvids and other species appearing in the previous issue of the Chronicle inspired considerable response, pro and con, from our readers. Making reference to the rhyme, “I do not like thee, Dr. Fell” #43, the author of this report, described the behavior of a companion crow who took a strong and immediate dislike to an apparently inoffensive visitor. This incident caught the attention of Gordon A. Graves of Seaside, Ore., who writes as follows:

*Gentlecorvi:*

*“I do not like thee Dr. Pell*

*Oh why, oh why I cannot tell.”*

*Well maybe, especially if they cannot tell because it would be incriminating?*

*It is my experience, with animals in general, that they have reasons for disliking certain individuals, if that is the case.*

*It may be no more than an accident. Perhaps the visitor in questions gave Hello something he thought Hello would like to eat. Hello did eat it but on second thought decided that this something was not crow food.*

*Or on a previous visit, more likely, this individual attracted a greater portion of Hello’s attention than he really wanted. Perhaps the gentleman wore jewelry attractive to Hello, or a scent Hello associated with the odor of crows of the opposite sex.*

*He thought Hello was unsanitary, or just annoying. When no one was looking he gave one of Hello’s tail feathers a yank. Hello no doubt, in an avoidance maneuver flew away, something that surprised no one present.*

*After serious contemplation, Hello decided to make said visitor unwelcome in the future.*

To which #43 has responded: All of these suggestions about why the crow may have reacted in such a seemingly inexplicable manner are quite plausible. But as I recollect the situation, none seem applicable. Obviously something which the people involved did not, perhaps could not detect about the appearance or behavior of the visitor suggested to Hello that he was a hostile ... threatening intruder. It seems to me that the moral, so to speak, of this happening is that being a keen observer – and corvids are among the keenest – does not insure that a crow, or for that matter any of us, will make sound judgments about the nature of the thing observed. Folksay aside, Dr. Fell may in fact have been a fine, upstanding fellow.

Gordon A. Graves, then turns to another matter which has aroused his interest. He writes:

*While I agree with Corvi 43’s thesis, I am inclined to think valuable information can be obtained by studying the intelligence of other animals. Particularly I am concerned with the intelligence of cetaceans with whom, I had some fleeting opportunity to work.*

*Now as far as language goes, something as lowly as a house cat has a language that children can learn, in part, and replicate – and get appropriate responses from the cat. But when it*

*comes to serious interactions with other species, humans rely upon one of our languages to communicate with other species. They can learn our words, visual, or other command symbols and perform tricks for treats. This is not a great leap, no matter how sophisticated, or advantageous, the tricks may be.*

*On the other hand we have gone to quite a lot of trouble to learn the cetacean’s various languages. We have come to know these languages to the extent that we know what they are saying to each other.*

*It seems to me if we wanted to actually know about these whales or porpoises we could try to replicate their languages to get their attention on a different level. They can never speak our languages, nor have they hands or stable platforms to devise any alternative communications. Not that we seem, in any sense, to be looking to them to communicate with us. No doubt, due to the limitations of their environment, their knowledge, according to our standards, would be restricted.*

*I have many times encountered, over the last 30 years, successful efforts in deciphering the languages of cetaceans, I have yet to hear a word about duplicating the basic sounds of those languages, forming messages, and transmitting them to the appropriate species.*

*Thanking you for your kind attention.*

Again #43 responds: Another good example of us using “their languages” is provided by bird watchers who locate the species they are searching for by expertly mimicking calls. Hunters do the same to attract turkeys as do those trying to scare off crows. But it is more or less true, as Graves writes, that “serious interactions” are absent. (The expression “lowly house cat” was no doubt a slip of the word processor.) Even assuming it possible, finding ways to enlighten each other about complex subjects of mutual interest (if indeed there are any) would require us and them to make many innovative adaptations. Consider only domestic dogs who as a result of millenniums of selective breeding have become especially familiar with and responsive to our language. But among themselves, as Konrad Lorenz demonstrated, dogs exchange information using a complex of sounds, smells, movements and expressions. Intellectually we may better come to understand some of their expression but to use them ourselves would require among other things, good command of a prominent tail.

Perhaps in the evolving electronic age there will come to be multi-media – an expression – solutions to some of the inter-specific communication problems. However, in this and many other regards, can do almost raises large, metaphysical questions about should do.



Another reader reacted quite differently to the intelligence commentary:

*Dear Corvi Chronicle*

*Corvi 43 abuses the notion of intelligence in the review of the*

*Continued on next page*

POINT & COUNTERPOINT *continued*

## Abstract thought and abstractions

*“Science Illustrated” story (“Corvid Intelligence” CC vxxiv No. 2)*

*If a worm is the smartest at being a worm then a tree is an absolute genius at growing acorns and a rock does a nice job of “coping with reality ... Broadly speaking.”*

*There is an importance difference between hereditary adaptations in behavior and cognition and the unique marker of intelligence – the capacity for abstract thinking.*

*Abstract thinking is the ability to hold an idea, in one’s mind, of something that does not exist. Humans do this routinely. Apes, much less other animals, have never demonstrated this ability.*

*That is why abstract thinking, a very valuable cognitive ability, was thought to be unique to humans – until the studies of the tool-making New Caledonian crows:*

*These crows are observed “picturing” the shape of an opening, and then fashioning the very shape needed for the job.*

*These studies are hardly the result of “pernicious biochauvinism” but observer-independent, accurate descriptions of reality, otherwise known as “facts.” – Corvi 55, C. Michiels, Los Angeles roost*

Again #43 replies: Along with many other attributes – e.g., observation, memory, learning – abstract thinking is certainly “a very valuable cognitive ability.” However, if identified as “the unique marker of intelligence,” there must also be such a thing as unintelligent cognition.

Abstract thinking is, writes Michiels, “the ability to hold an idea in one’s mind, of something that does not exist.” Using this definition, a roster of abstract thinkers which includes only humans and the crows of New Caledonia seems incomplete. Observations of other corvids, dolphins and primates (the latter at the Think Tank of the National Zoo) indicate the list can be lengthened with a half dozen of more species. In regards these matters there is another obvious reality. We know a very little about the mind sets of a few species but nothing about the mentality of most of them. That there may be more going on in the heads of other birds than we now know about or even have imagined, seems to me to be a plausible abstraction.

Michiels has a bit of fun with trees. They have become extremely impressive, successful beings seemingly – as of now – without use of cognition, intelligent or otherwise. But of course that would be disputed by the Findhorn folks. 🐦

## TV’s gloom and doom birdies

In many places and times, crows and ravens have been thought to be good, clever birds – competent, instructive and entertaining. Quite commonly they have also been regarded mythically as semi-divine creatures who were initially powerful agents of supreme deities. In Japan the First Crow is credited in legend with placing the sun in the sky. In Siberia he taught people to reproduce; regulated the tides in British Columbia; brought fire to the world in Australia and elsewhere did many other great things.

But in what we call Western (European) Civilization crows and ravens have regularly been regarded as disreputable and destructive, even as unholy servants of the Powers of Darkness. Thus while there are prides of lions, gaggles of geese and elations of larks, we have murders of crows and unkindnesses of ravens. (This is despite ASCAR’s continuing efforts to encourage such expressions as an “entertainment of crows,” and an “intelligence of ravens.”) From Shakespeare to Poe to Hitchcock to Ken

Burns, corvids are frequently used as foreboding symbols of doom and gloom, the wicked and creepy. Currently cable TV has picked up on this tradition and makes enthusiastic use of it. For example:

🐦 In a moving 15-minute segment of “Warmer” (the 12-hour special produced by the Public But Sensitive Corporation), a disconsolate raven perches atop a melting ice house while a disconsolate Eskimo scans shrinking expanses of Arctic sea ice, fruitlessly searches for polar bear signs.

🐦 During a recent episode of “The Job Makers,” the popular prime time, economic melodrama which appears weekly on FUN (The Fairly Unbalanced Network) a flock of crows call derisively as federal and United Nations agents harass Joe, the Hardworking But Small Businessman and his hardworking, minimum wage, aluminum siding crew.

🐦 Dramatic footage showing crows snatching food from uninsured children

of corporate farm workers is analyzed by six nonpartisan pundits assembled by CNN (Cautiously Nuanced News).

🐦 “Taxes Smacks Us,” the T Parte Report, regularly is opened by an animated cartoon raven who repetitiously croaks “Ever More.”

🐦 On his “Much More” show, a Saturday morning review of current events, Moorefield Boreing conducted a live interview with a maintenance engineer formerly employed by the Red State Reactionaries, Inc. Skillfully questioned by Boreing, the guest confided that he had heard several rumors of RSR mercenaries plotting to introduce rabid crows into urban areas.

🐦 Based on evidence supplied by several fast food delivery professionals (one of whom is a trained forensic busboy) Wright Beckly, zany host of the “I’m Wright” talk and opinion show, claims that a number of White House staffers and other socialists, frequently eat crow or soon will be obliged to do so.



## THE TALK OF THE ROOST

### OUTRAGED

**M**id-November last year, we found an email subject line we couldn't ignore: *Crows under attack at Pennsylvania Capitol*. The writer proclaimed:

I am outraged, OUTRAGED! I say.

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Department of General Services is deliberately harassing crows. It seems a goodly population of crows traditionally likes to roost on the state capitol grounds. Rather than welcome such an august group of avians, Capitol police and the DGS attack them with firearms (blanks, thankfully) and some kind of device that makes a whistling noise in an attempt to chase them away. It is unclear whether the Crows leave, but apparently they return to the Capitol every year anyway.

This seems a violation of the crows' rights to petition for redress of grievances, and as a public policy matter, it might be better to chase the human senators and representatives away, and let the crows do the legislating. The Crows seem smarter and more honest, given the Human legislators' reputation for corruption and incompetence. (The state budget was more than four months late, and a second set of indictments was just handed down on some top Human lawmakers and their aides for using public resources for campaign purposes.)

The excuse for this suppression of rights is the claim that the Crows' dropping are posing a health and safety hazard. My theory is the Republicans

and Democrats are embarrassed by the intelligence and integrity of the Corvid contingent.

### ON THEIR TOES

**A** dance titled "Corvidae" created and performed by Cal State Fullerton's dance department was chosen to perform at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C.

Six dance majors performed a piece titled "Corvidae," choreographed by Colin Conner and directed by Debra Noble. According to an article in Cal State's Daily Titan, "Corvidae" is based on the enormous knowledge and animal power vested in human bodies. It is inspired by the ferocity and mystery of crows and ravens – seen as messengers throughout the ages.

### TONGUE IN BEAK

**A** headline in the Missoula (Mont.) Independent Free Thinking that got our attention: UM's Tongue of a Bird fails to fly. "Tongue of a Bird" is the title of a play by Ellen McLaughlin that was performed at the University of Montana this spring. Erika Fredrickson's review did not rave about the performance, but her commentary on human reaction to birds flying into window panes led to her thoughts on bird imagery in general and crows and ravens specifically.

"... That moment when feathered body strikes pane with a sickening thud always seems hard to shake. For one thing, you can't help but think of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*. And there's the guilt: that our humanmade structures inadvertently

inflict harm on the natural world. If you don't recognize the sound right away, it's easy to feel a flutter of panic at the disturbing thwack, the sudden collision creating an unnatural disturbance in the otherwise familiar chain of daily events. It's downright unsettling.

"Maybe that's because birds already carry a history of metaphor and meaning. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" brims with supernatural tones. In European and native mythology, crows and ravens symbolize death—sometimes with positive spiritual undertones and other times more negative. In literature, birds accompany demons, pirates and vampires. They serve as protectorates, and other times they cause harm (as in poking one's eyes out). Their flight represents independence, or the fleetingness of life.

"That birds, in general, are fraught with symbolism makes them an easy target for storytelling. Insert birds into almost any tale, and you've got instant profundity—or so it seems. That's the case in ... McLaughlin's 'Tongue of a Bird,' a dramatic play that uses birds to symbolize memory, captivity, madness and freedom."

### BLACK RAVEN BREWS

**A** toast to this Redmond, Wash., brewery celebrating its first anniversary in May. Ales include an award-winning Trickster IPA and Totem Pale and many more.



## LITERARY NOTES

*Dickens' letter to a friend on death of Grip*

We learned that we had missed the 2008-2009 exhibit at the Free Library of Philadelphia's Rare Book Department, "Quoth the raven: A 200 Year Remembrance of the Life and Legacy of Edgar Allan Poe." Visitors to this library know that its rare collections include a stuffed raven, Grip, a pet of author Charles Dickens, on exhibit year round.

Grip was a minor character in Dickens' historical novel, *Barnaby Rudge*, published in installments in 1841. Poe who was earning his living as a book reviewer in Philadelphia then, favorably reviewed the book noting that the raven's "...croakings might have been prophetically heard in the course of the drama."

Poe's poem, *The Raven*, was published in 1845, and the library points out that many Poe scholars believe Grip may have been inspiration for the poem. James Russell Lowell made such an observation in his 1848 *Fable for Critic* —

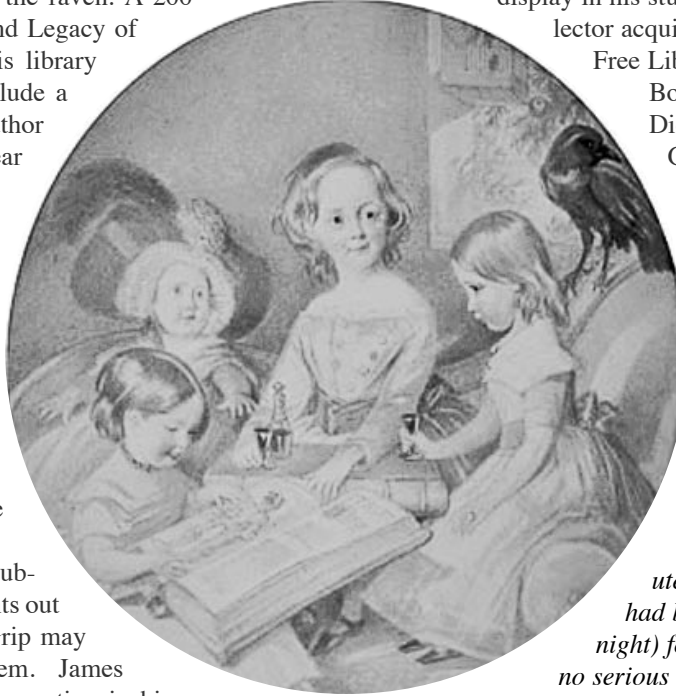
*There comes Poe with his raven, like Barnaby Rudge,  
Three-fifths of him genius and two-fifths sheer fudge.*

We also found a blog by Lisa Waller Rogers, "Lisa's History Room Where past is always present," and learned that Dickens had three pet ravens, all named Grip. Rogers, a former school teacher with a degree in history who writes children's books in addition to her blog, says Dickens included a pet raven in *Barnaby Rudge* at the suggestion of his children, who loved Grip even though he bit their ankles.

Rogers notes that Grip could speak many words and had many comic turns, including the popping of a champagne cork, but Poe emphasized the bird's darker "devil-bird" qualities. His bird spoke only one word, "Nevermore." Poe's raven may have represented a messenger from hell or the after-life, mirroring the gloom and foreshadowing the doom of the troubled narrator who misses his beloved Lenore.

Grip I died the same year *Barnaby Rudge* was published. Dickens had the bird preserved and mounted in a glass case for display in his study. After Dickens' death, a Poe collector acquired Grip I and donated him to the Free Library of Philadelphia.

Both the library and Rogers post Dickens' letter to inform a friend of Grip's death. His friend was the artist Daniel Maclise, who provided illustrations for his books and portraits of Dickens and his family, including one with Grip and the eldest four of Dickens' nine children: Charley, Mamie, Katey, and Walter shown here.



*Mr. Dear Maclise,  
You will be greatly shocked  
and grieved to hear that the Raven  
is no more.*

*He expired to-day at a few minutes after Twelve o'clock at noon. He had been ailing (as I told you t'other night) for a few days, but we anticipated no serious result, conjecturing that a portion of the white paint he swallowed last summer might be lingering about his vitals without having any serious effect upon his constitution. Yesterday afternoon he was taken so much worse that I sent an express for the medical gentleman (Mr. Herring) who promptly attended, and administered a powerful dose of castor oil. Under the influence of this medicine, he recovered so far as to be able at 8 o'clock p.m. to bite Topping. His night was peaceful. This morning at daybreak he appeared better; received (agreeably to the doctor's directions) another dose of castor oil; and partook plentifully of some warm gruel, the flavor of which he appeared to relish. Towards eleven o'clock he was so much worse that it was found necessary to muffle the stable knocker. At half past, or thereabouts, he was heard talking to himself about the horse and Topping's family, and to add some incoherent expressions which are supposed to have been either a foreboding of his approaching dissolution, or some wishes relative to the disposal of his little property — consisting chiefly of a*

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ASCAR now numbers — so think some who enjoy counting things — about 900 members. Alphabetically and in terms of interests and attitudes members range — an expression — from academics to Zoroastrians. But only the Editor and an associate minion know who and where they all are. This is in keeping with the Corvi Privacy Act that forbids those who know from talking about or to other corvis or using their names and addresses in the

*Privacy act*

Chronicle without permission. The CPA is occasionally tested by purveyors of crow curios wanting access to mailing lists.

However, because many members have similar interests and have indicated a desire to make the acquaintance of others who share them, some thought has been given to adjust-

ing the CPA to accommodate these wishes. Therefore anyone who would like to hear from other corvi should send along their name and address to the editor. These will be published occasionally in the Chronicle. Names are not absolutely necessary — Corvi numbers will do — but addresses are. Obviously those who wish to remain known only to the editor and her associate minion should do nothing and will continue to enjoy the protection of CPA.

# POST MORTEM *transforming experiences for observers*

The following article by Tim Mowry appeared in the Nov. 18, 2009, edition of the Fairbanks (Alaska) News-Miner.

**R**avens have feelings, too, at least judging from an eerie scene Tuesday morning on Minnie Street in east Fairbanks.

After two ravens roosting on top of a power transformer were electrocuted, hundreds of ravens showed up within a minute or two and started silently circling overhead and perching in nearby trees.

Rod Stephens, owner of Rod's Saw Shop across the street, saw the scene play out before his eyes after a man pulled into the shop and reported seeing sparks flying on top of the transformer.

"I walked out there and there were all these birds just circling. There were ravens in all the trees," he said. "It was weird."

Stephens estimated the number of ravens at "a couple hundred."

"It was like that movie, 'The Birds,'" he said. "I walked out and wasn't sure if they were going to start dive-bombing me."

One of the electrocuted ravens had fallen to the ground and the other was still caught in the wires and transformer, Stephens said.

Ben Brees, a computer technician

at Geek City across the street from Stephens' shop, was driving to work when he saw what he described as "a vortex of ravens circling" next to the computer store.

"I could see them a half-mile away," Brees said. "It was a funnel of black birds. I pulled up to the building right as they were circling."

The birds only hung around for a few minutes before flying off, Stephens said.

"They said their respects and moved on," he said.

There were no power outages reported as a result of the birds being electrocuted, said Corinne Bradish, spokeswoman for Golden Valley Electric Association.

It's not uncommon for squirrels and birds to get electrocuted while perching on or crossing electrical wires, power poles and transformers, Bradish said. The company notifies the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service whenever ravens are killed, she said.

Travis Booms, the nongame biologist at the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in Fairbanks, wasn't surprised to hear ravens had been electrocuted. More ravens are probably electrocuted in Fairbanks than people think, he said.

"They're the same size as a lot of raptors that we know get electrocuted on a

regular basis, so it wouldn't surprise me at all if ravens get electrocuted on a pretty regular basis," he said.

The fact that incident attracted dozens of other ravens to the scene intrigued Booms.

"I've never heard of ravens holding funerals," he said. "It wouldn't surprise me if the birds that got zapped were still alive and were acting erratically. That would attract the attention of other ravens."

**M**owry's article inspired – among others – the following comments from News-Miner readers:

... I was walking through the park when all the crows started to make a racket. I discovered a crow had fallen into a shallow pool and couldn't fly away and all the others were in the trees around the pool squawking. I climbed in and got it out and they calmed down and flew away.

... Ravens should be the state bird. They are the only thing I would miss if I leave Fairbanks. I see these tough birds at Fred Meyer parking lot at negative 25 temp. Can't help but respect them. Just do a google search of their extraordinary intelligence. Heaven help the person who

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## LITERARY NOTES *continued*

### Dickens describes grief in loss of companion raven

*halfpence which he had buried in different parts of the garden. On the clock striking twelve he appeared slightly agitated, but he soon recovered, walked twice or thrice along the coach-house, stopped to bark, staggered, exclaimed "Halloa old girl!" (his favorite expression) and died.*

*He behaved throughout with decent fortitude, equanimity, and self-possession, which cannot be too much admired. I deeply regret that being in ignorance of his danger I did not attend to receive his last instructions. Something remarkable about his eyes occasioned Topping to run for the doctor at Twelve. When they returned together our friend was gone. It was the medical gentleman who informed me of his decease. He did it with great caution and delicacy, preparing me by the remark that "a jolly queer start had taken place," but the shock was very great notwithstanding.*

*I am not wholly free from suspicions of poison – a malicious butcher has been heard to say that he would "do" for him – his plea was, that he would not be molested in taking orders down*

*the Mews, by any bird that wore a tail – other persons have also been heard to threaten – among others, Charles Knight who has just started a weekly publication, price fourpence; Barnaby being, as you know, Threepence. I have directed a post mortem examination, and the body has been removed to Mr. Herring's school of Anatomy for that purpose.*

*I could wish, if you can take the trouble, that you would inclose this to Forester when you have read it. I cannot discharge the painful task of communication more than once. Were they Ravens who took Manna to somebody in the wilderness? At times, I hope they were, and at others I fear they were not, or they would certainly have stolen it by the way. In profound sorrow, I am ever Your bereaved friend. CD*

*Kate is as well as can be expected but terribly low as you may suppose. The children seem rather glad of it. He bit their ankles. But that was play –*

Courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

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# MUSIC TO OUR EARS *Shearwater and Passerine*

Of all the 8x10 flyers on day-glo colored paper tacked to a coffee shop wall, I couldn't stop staring at this image named for two birds and wondering about the band concert it was advertising.

I missed the concert but searched the internet to learn that Shearwater is an art rock band based in Austin, Texas. The captivating poster was the cover for their album "Shearwater Rook" by Matador Records. I sampled their music and enjoyed the sound – a pleasant blend of strings, brass and percussion including a waterphone and hammered dulcimer.

The band leader, Jonathan Meilburg, is all but an ornithologist at heart with a soft spot for the predator Johnny Rook or Striated Caracara (*Phalacrocorax auritus*). Found mostly in the Falkland Islands off the coasts of Chile and Argentina, the caracara is one of the rarest birds of prey. Though not a corvid, 19th century sailors called the bird, Johnny Rook. Charles Darwin observed it on trips to the Falklands, noting that bird was "exceedingly numerous" and was "extraordinarily tame and fearless" and



"very mischievous and inquisitive, quarrelsome and passionate."

The Falklands Conservation Website says that once sheep were introduced and farming developed about 1850 on East Falkland and 1867 on West Falkland, the bird became a pest. In 1908 Falkland authorities paid bounties for killed

Johnny Rooks. Within two years, the birds' numbers decreased and by 1922 were very low. Today there is a hefty fine (about \$4,500) for shooting a Johnny Rook.

The Shearwater band leader Meilburg spent part of a year in the Falklands after graduating from Sewanee: The University of the South in Tennessee in 1997. In the Aug. 6, 2008, edition of Scientific American, Meilburg told reporter Nikkhill Swaminathan, that he went to the Falklands with a fellowship to research "community life at the ends of the earth." There he met Robin Woods, an ornithologist researching the caracara for Falklands Conservation, and asked to be his field assistant.

Meilburg's life has not been the same since. The Johnny Rook influences his music and lyrics and his academic pursuits. He finished a master's degree in biogeography – in his case examining the distribution of living things -- at the University of Texas. His thesis examined reasons the bird is found only on a few islands of Argentina and Chilean Tierra del Fuego.

"When you see these birds, you assume

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## POST MORTEM *continued*

### Fairbanks raven gathering story sparks commentary

hurts one of these magnificent animals!

...HAH! They just spotted the body and showed up for a free meal. Fortunately they're smart enough to realize that if their buddy got zapped, the same thing could happen to them. They're just circling, trying to figure a solution to the problem....

...This reminds me of a great story I once read about crows, titled: *Silverspot: The Story of a Crow*, by Ernest Thompson Seton

An excellent story about just how smart these birds are.

... At an Athabascan funeral for a female elder they carried the casket outdoors only to find a large circle of ravens sitting on the ground of the parking lot. As soon as the casket was loaded up, they

flew away. Any reason for that? Were the mourners seeing things? Were the ravens pretending to be human? Are humans less intelligent than ravens or just more certain of themselves? You have to have an open mind to notice things. I promise that your life will be richer, and that some people will think you are crazy. After all, by then it won't matter!

...I once had a southern beekeeper i lived with tell me of thousands of crows mourning their head crow, i will believe it having watched and befriended many of them.

... IH8TAK wrote - Two down ten thousand to go. They should let us shoot those rat's with wings. Those birds are nothing but a nuisance.

... Dude... those are our ancestors you are disparaging.

... Ravens circling means there is food somewhere! Around here it means: an open garbage can!

... The ravens circling would have been something to see. Crows I will readily shoot on sight, they make great practice for ducks and geese, but the Raven displays an intelligence and understanding to the careful observer. I blame my interest on E.A. Poe, that was a great book.

### Last Rites

An August 1945 Reader's Digest: column titled "Wild Wisdom," letters from readers included this story of an apparent ritual by crows in the presence of a dead crow.

On our Nebraska farm was a cotton-

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MUSIC TO OUR EARS *continued*

## Corvid names inspire musicians

they'd be as common as crows, or the grackles here in central Texas, because they seem so adaptable, especially to different kinds of food, and interested in novel objects and trying to figure out how they can make use of them," he told Swaminathan. "You look at their close relatives—there are 10 species of caracara, almost all of them live in South America—and they all sort of share, to one degree or another, this kind of behavior. Though none of them are as extreme about it as the striateds are. They're sort of like crows, but there are crows in South America. They are more like the falcon attempt at a corvidlike scavenger."

Asked if his song "Rooks," which refers to scores of birds dying off at once, was a climate change warning, Meilburg replied: People keep calling it apocalyptic, which I don't agree with at all. I think the very notion of an apocalypse is kind of invented out of human hubris—the idea that once we cease to be, that everything must cease to be. People can't stand the idea of the world going on without us. That song is more about balances being shifted. It's painting in real broad strokes, but I was imagining all these crows just suddenly dying, which in smaller numbers they've certainly been doing, especially with West Nile [virus]

here. Then, there are starlings eating the bodies. So, it's not just like all the birds are dying; some of the birds are dying. That's sort of what we see as people: We privilege certain species over other ones.

### Passerine

One thing led to another and I stumbled onto music by Passerine, a Sarasota, Fla.-based band categorized as traditional folk and Americana. Their page on myspace.com says the band formed in 2008 with two established songwriter vocalists Carmela Pedicini (also performs as Radio Free Carmela) and Tanya Radtke (both acoustic guitarists) with David Brain (dobro, resonating slide guitar) and Miles Tweed (upright bass).



They perform original music by Pedicini and Radtke, who each released solo CDs in 2008, and arrangements of traditional songs like "The Blackest Crow."

One Web report says that Pedicini once told Brain about her dreams that mostly involved ravens. Brain recalled that the origin of his last name was the Gaelic word for raven. He began researching raven myths. "I came across in my search for ravens this word, 'passerine,' that is the order of birds that includes all of the perching birds, all the birds that have talons with opposing thumbs so that they can perch on branches, and it includes all of the songbirds," he said. "But it also includes not just birds that sing musically but also birds like the raven. In mythology, everybody thinks of the raven from that Edgar Allan Poe thing, you know, the grim harbinger of death, but actually in most cultures where they have raven myths, the raven is a trickster and a courier who brings all kinds of news, and is known for having a great sense of humor, known for being one who responds to difficult situations with creativity. There are all kinds of great stories about the raven when you start reading over the different myths. Really, it's an inspiring totem to have."

### POST MORTEM *continued*

## 1945 tale of last rites

wood grove in which thousands of crows roosted each night after forays into our cornfields. My father heard that they would leave a place where a dead crow was hung, so he laid a freshly killed crow in the crotch of a tree.

That evening the crows circled over the trees for a time, cawing excitedly. Then they began settling on the ground until the entire flock was standing in a semicircle. An old crow hopped into the cleared space, facing his fellows, and they grew suddenly quiet. We could hardly believe our eyes as the old crow cawed in a rising crescendo of agitation, then resumed his place in the circle. Another crow flew out and addressed them. Several of the listening crows cawed responses. It looked like a town meeting.

When a half dozen crows had spoken, the entire flock rose into the air and followed the first speaker. He picked the dead crow from the limb, much as a fish hawk carries a fish in its claws, and flew low over the ground until the weight of the dead bird brought him to a stop. Another crow immediately swooped down and carried the burden a similar distance. A third crow picked up from there, and, flying low over our pasture pond, dropped the dead bird into the water.

At once all turned about and went back to the grove. Once more the trees were black and silent with roosting crows.

— Wilma Hays

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## THANKSGIVING PIE

Dear Corvi Chronicle:

I need to send you a check. I have been a freeloader for a while. And I'd like to add my sister as a crow lover to you mailing list.

She put out an upside down pie at Thanksgiving to see what would happen. Her wild turkey flock surrounded it discussed it but decided it was too dangerous to approach much less eat. They went off the to the bird feeder. Then the squirrels arrive and hopped and chattered and flung themselves from tree to tree to get a bird's eye view of the round object. But they too decided it was too weird to get near.

Then the crows came and discussed it and scampered about and then ate it all up. – *Corvi Crow Cove, Cumberland, Maine roost*

## DISTANT PLEASURE

Dear Kaw River Valley Roost:

I haven't had a whole lot to do with crows anymore, ever since an unfortunate interaction occurred between one of their young and a beloved animal companion of mine. But I enjoy seeing them fly overhead and hearing their calls elsewhere. And I especially like reading Corvi Chronicle when it comes, usually sitting down and reading it in its entirety all at one time. -- #37033, Kensington, Md.

## SACRED CROW

I'm an Cherokee Indian. My grandmother came back to visit me as she said she would after she died; and therefore the sacred crow's name-I-don't-know to me was grandmother.

The crow had red eyes and perfect white V's upon each wing. And the tail feathers had two perfect white colored rows as they were spread apart.



Illustration by Jim Haines

## LETTERS

I asked grandmother when she told me how the sacred crow would come to me after she died, "can I feed you a brownie?" She laughed, "Yes" and then she said, "A female white buffalo will be born shortly afterwards – after I saw her as the sacred crow – and ur people will travel from far away to come and see me then. I will be the buffalo, because I, the bird, will die and come back as this buffalo."

Believe it or not, I was eating a brownie when I saw this sacred crow, my grandmother, fly by me.

The buffalo was born.

The uneaten brownie that I had in my hand was gone when I went back to look for the pieces that I'd thrown towards the sacred bird's tail direction as if flew less than 8-feet away – eye to eye with me.

Is this a species of crow one you'd know? – *Sparrow, Hopedale, Ill.*

EDITOR'S NOTE: In regard your query we have consulted several leading taxonomical authorities, none of whom knows of a corvid species native to the United States that fits your description of the bird you observed. Elsewhere there are a number of corvid species whose plumage is both black and white: Collared Crow (*Corvus torquatus*) of Southeast Asia; Pied Crow (*Corvus albus*) of Africa; Hooded Crow (*Corvus cornoe*) of Eurasia; House Crow (*Corvus splendens*) of which Mark Twain entertainingly wrote on his visit to the Indian subcontinent, and others. Perhaps it is at least worth considering that after your grand-

mother passed on, she chose to relocate.

Within the United States, our two common corvid species, the American and the Fish Crow, are normally all black birds but occasionally individual ones display a few white feathers. Most often these are young, nutritionally challenged birds. Usually the white feathers disappear if the bird successfully moults for several years.

Finally as has been reported in the Chronicle, there are now and then, all-white crows -- genetic sports, so to speak. Albinism occurs in many other species of birds and mammals, including buffalo.

Though it is not directly related to your query, you might be interested in the following: In 1737 the Czar of Russia sent Vitus Bering, a Danish sea captain, west to explore Siberia and from there, if possible, North America. The chief naturalist of the expedition was Georg Wilhelm Steller, a German and one of the leading European zoologists of the time. In 1742 Bering and Steller reached Alaska, the first Europeans known to have done so. Steller accurately described many species of mammals and birds which were then unknown to European natural historians. Some still bear his name including the Steller Sea Lion and Steller Jay. Steller also encountered what he considered to be a species of white ravens. But these corvids have never been since seen by any naturalists. If there was a species of such white corvids it is possible that shortly after their discovery they became extinct as verifiably did the Steller Sea Cow. Or, Steller may have chanced upon a genetic pocket of ravens which included many albino birds.

In any event we appreciate your interesting report and hope you will keep us informed if there are further developments.

The Corvi Chronicle is published irregularly by corvi who have an interest in or need for doing so for members of The American Society of Crows and Ravens and others. There is no subscription fee, but it is customary and seemly to send contributions to pay for production and mailing. There is a direct connection between contributions, the size of the Chronicle and its frequency of distribution. Those who do not choose to contribute will continue to receive the Chronicle and enjoy all membership privileges. However, they will no doubt suffer a loss of self-esteem and may occasionally be mocked by other corvis.

Members are reminded to make new corvi by duplicating and passing along issues of the Chronicle.

ASCAR has a home page or chat room on the Internet:

<http://www.ascaronline.org/>

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The Chronicle accepts articles and manuscripts of reasonable length on any topic acknowledged by The Board, news clippings and general correspondence. Unused material will be returned in good time to the authors. Commentary (insightful, indignant or otherwise) should be addressed to:

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Corvi 9503 of Los Angeles sent an origami pecking crow and a diagram for creating our own flock. It begins with a square sheet of paper and is helpful if one side of the paper is another color. For more instruction, these two Web resources may be helpful:

**YouTube: Ben makes a paper crow**

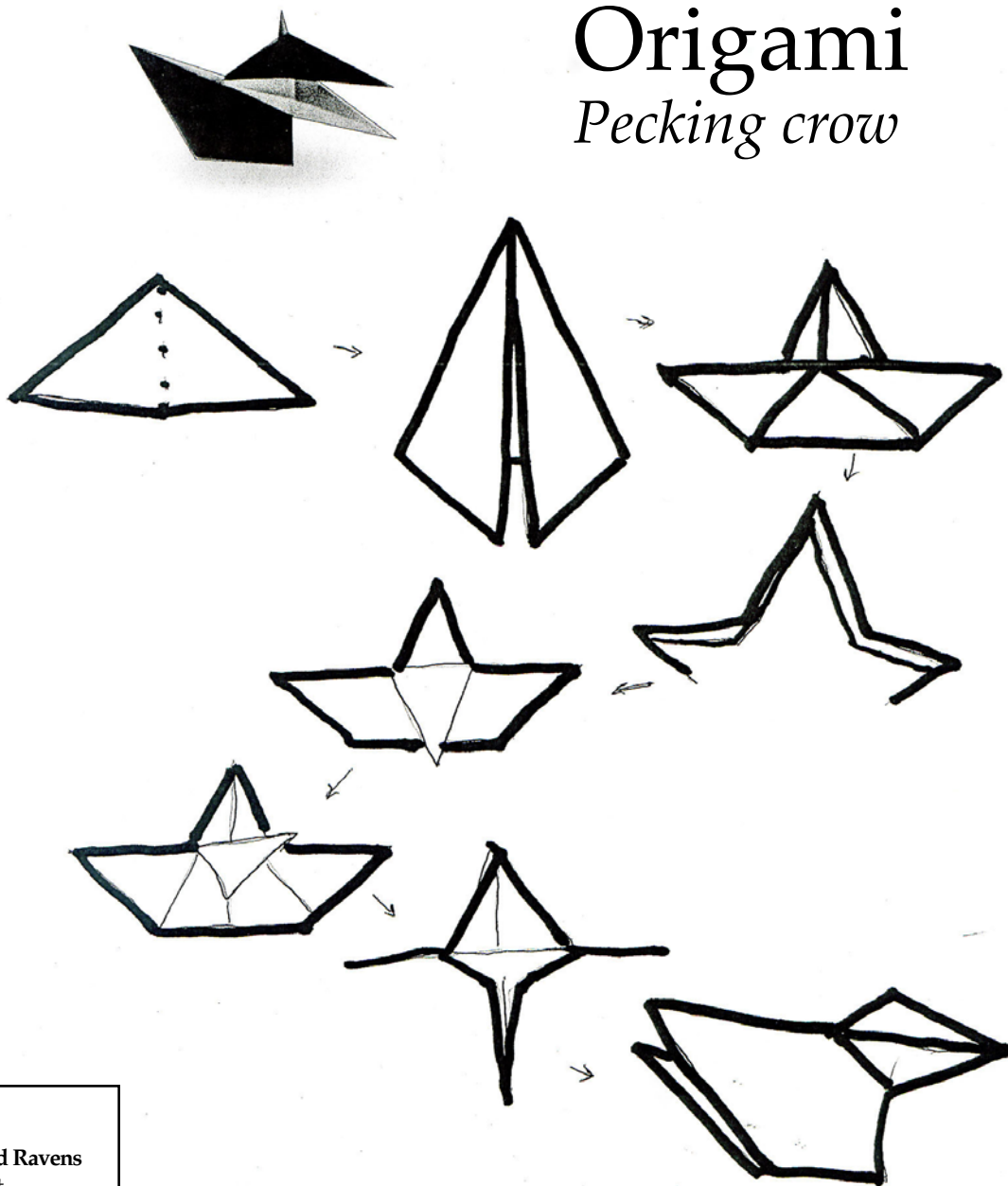
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ik8hTNqTQuQ&feature=related>

**flickr from Yahoo: Pecking Crow 2**

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/mor-ethanmaths/2246327029/>

# Origami

## *Pecking crow*



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